# Transportation & Accessibility

"The prosperity of a city does not depend on private car traffic, but on accessibility in general, on the amenity of its streets and open spaces."

*Hartmut Topp at the 1st International Making Cities Livable Conference, Venice, Italy, 1985*

## Importance of Linkages

Downtown Asheville is the one place in the community, to which virtually every citizen travels at least occasionally. Downtown is also a destination for tourists and regional visitors. For Downtown to serve its function as the center of the community and a viable attraction for tourists, it must be accessible. And, it must be accessible to the entire population, not just to motorists. Accessibility requires the creation and maintenance of highly functional transportation linkages. These linkages must create a strong connection between the Center City and other areas of town, providing clear vehicular and pedestrian routes that enable area residents and visitors to connect with the businesses, shopping, and attractions in Downtown. Downtown's transportation systems must enable people to access Downtown for a wide variety of purposes and in a wide variety of ways.

In addition to providing accessibility to Downtown, linkages play a vital role in the livability of surrounding neighborhoods. Linkages create and promote connectivity and establish a framework upon which a neighborhood is developed and defined. Unfortunately, significant transportation impediments were created in the 1960s with the construction of I-240, severing many connections between Downtown and the Historic Montford and Chestnut Hill Districts. An additional barrier was produced during the creation of South Charlotte Street, which also severely impaired the neighborhood connections between the East End/Martin Luther King community and Downtown. The creation of new and improved linkages that integrate, rather than isolate, will foster a sense of community and contribute to the revitalization of Downtown and adjacent neighborhoods.

Within the Center City, transportation linkages are crucial in developing market synergy among Downtown functions. Visitors must be able to travel easily to multiple destinations within the Center City. Downtown Asheville should be a part of a complete system of safe city streets, sidewalks, greenways, and bicycle friendly routes that extend throughout the city. Pedestrian linkages (functional, attractive

sidewalks) are of primary importance within Downtown. Any changes to Downtown's transportation systems should be made with the pedestrian and bicyclist in mind.

The emergence of Downtown Asheville as a residential neighborhood and destination for cultural events, shopping, and entertainment creates a need for improved linkages throughout the Center City. It is essential to maintain existing linkages, identify problem areas, and implement improvements to enhance the quality of all modes of Downtown transportation. Preserving and improving linkages within Downtown will enable residents and visitors to move safely and comfortably within the area and contribute to the success of retail and other local businesses.

## Vehicular Circulation

Efficient vehicular circulation is necessary to support the continued development and revitalization of Downtown Asheville. It is critical that strategies for improving vehicular circulation reinforce, rather than compromise, the pedestrian environment. Vehicular circulation should serve three primary functions with respect to the Center City.

*Existing conditions of Market Street (above) and how streetscape improvements can greatly strengthen and enhance pedestrian connectivity (below).*

## Patton Avenue and College Street as Two-Way Streets

In the 1950s, Downtown Asheville was a vibrant center for shopping, government, and offices and College Street and Patton Avenue were both two-way streets. Because the "cut" through Beaucatcher Mountain had not yet been made the only way to get to the other side of the Mountain from Downtown, was through the tunnel, which opened in 1928. As a result, there were many vehicles using College and Patton, not only to get to and from Downtown, but also to get through it.

At the time, planners and traffic engineers were interested in moving traffic quickly and efficiently through Downtown. The creation of one-way streets was considered the best way to meet this objective. As a result, College Street and Patton Avenue were changed to a one-way pair in 1954. At that time, there were predictions of a very high number of vehicles using the two streets. The I-240 expressway was built in 1958, and then continued through Beaucatcher Mountain in the early1970s. People driving from one side of town to another now had a more efficient route, reducing the number of vehicles traveling through Downtown.

Today, the prevailing thought among transportation planners is that one-way streets are inferior to two-way streets in central business districts because they make businesses less accessible, can be confusing to visitors, and can encourage speeding in an area where there are many pedestrians. Additionally, two-way streets, by "calming" traffic, creating a better pedestrian environment and improving business vitality, are consistent with the view of downtown as a destination and a neighborhood instead of a place to get through.

In a national survey done in 2000, twenty-two cities and towns had converted major downtown streets back to two-way traffic flow. A majority of the communities that converted downtown streets from one-way to two-way reported positive results including better business access, more pedestrian friendly environment, better traffic distribution, and increased investment.

*Sources*: Reed, Doug. "Business District Now Largely a Network of One-Way Streets" Asheville Citizen Times, May 2, 1954.
"Converting Downtown Streets from One-Way to Two-Way Yields Positive Results" Urban Transportation Monitor, May 12, 2000.

The first function is to provide access to Downtown from surrounding areas. The capacity of streets leading into Downtown must be sufficient to support existing Downtown businesses and attractions and meet the needs of projected new development. Vehicular access to Downtown is currently very good. However, improvements are necessary to ensure continued vehicular accessibility as Downtown is further developed. Opportunities should be sought to improve the safety, efficiency and appearance of each primary vehicular entrance to Downtown. Freeway interchanges, especially the Merrimon Avenue interchange, should receive high priority. The I-26 Connector project presents a potential opportunity to provide a dedicated route for Patton Avenue that is separate from I-240. This would be highly beneficial in that it would separate local and interstate traffic, reclaim land for community use, and provide an enhanced gateway into Downtown.

The vehicular circulation system should also allow through traffic to travel around Downtown's intensely developed core, thereby reducing congestion in the heart of Down-

"There's more to life than increasing its speed."

*Gandhi*

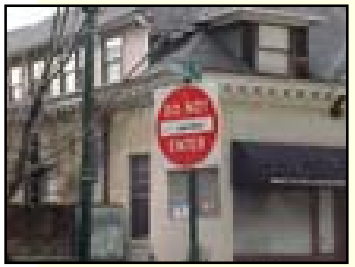
town. I-240 and S. Charlotte Street currently serve this function well. Hilliard Avenue, Woodfin Street, and Asheland Avenue also serve this function. An informal Downtown loop, utilizing these existing streets and improving connections where possible, should be developed. I-240 presents a number of challenges and opportunities for Downtown. It is critical that any NCDOT project on this freeway be carefully designed with the following objectives in mind:

- Improve safety and access to Downtown;
- Keep the right-of-way width at a minimum to reduce negative impacts on adjacent properties.
- Restore and improve vehicular and pedestrian connections between Downtown and adjacent neighborhoods.

Downtown's vehicular circulation pattern should provide convenient access for local traffic within the core. The objective is not to move vehicles as quickly as possible, but rather to move traffic efficiently as part of a balanced transportation system that contributes to the overall vision of the Center City as a vibrant, economically healthy, and livable Downtown.

Patton Avenue, College Street, and Battery Park Avenue should be returned to their original two-way configuration. Other streets, including S. Spruce Street, should also be considered for potential conversion. Studies have shown that two-way streets have a number of benefits over one-way streets in Downtown locations. Two-way streets accomplish the following:

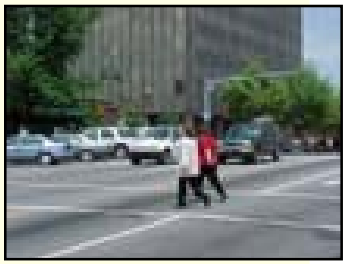
- Positively effect circulation by slowing speeds, improving safety, and providing more options for getting around.
- Reduce confusion for drivers and pedestrians including tourists.
- Provide a safer and more pleasant environment for pedestrians.
- Positively impact local businesses by increasing access, improving business visibility, and fostering a pedestrian atmosphere.



*Conversion of some one-way streets into two-way can improve accessibility to Downtown shops and businesses (above).*

*Montford bridge links historic neighborhood to the Center City.*

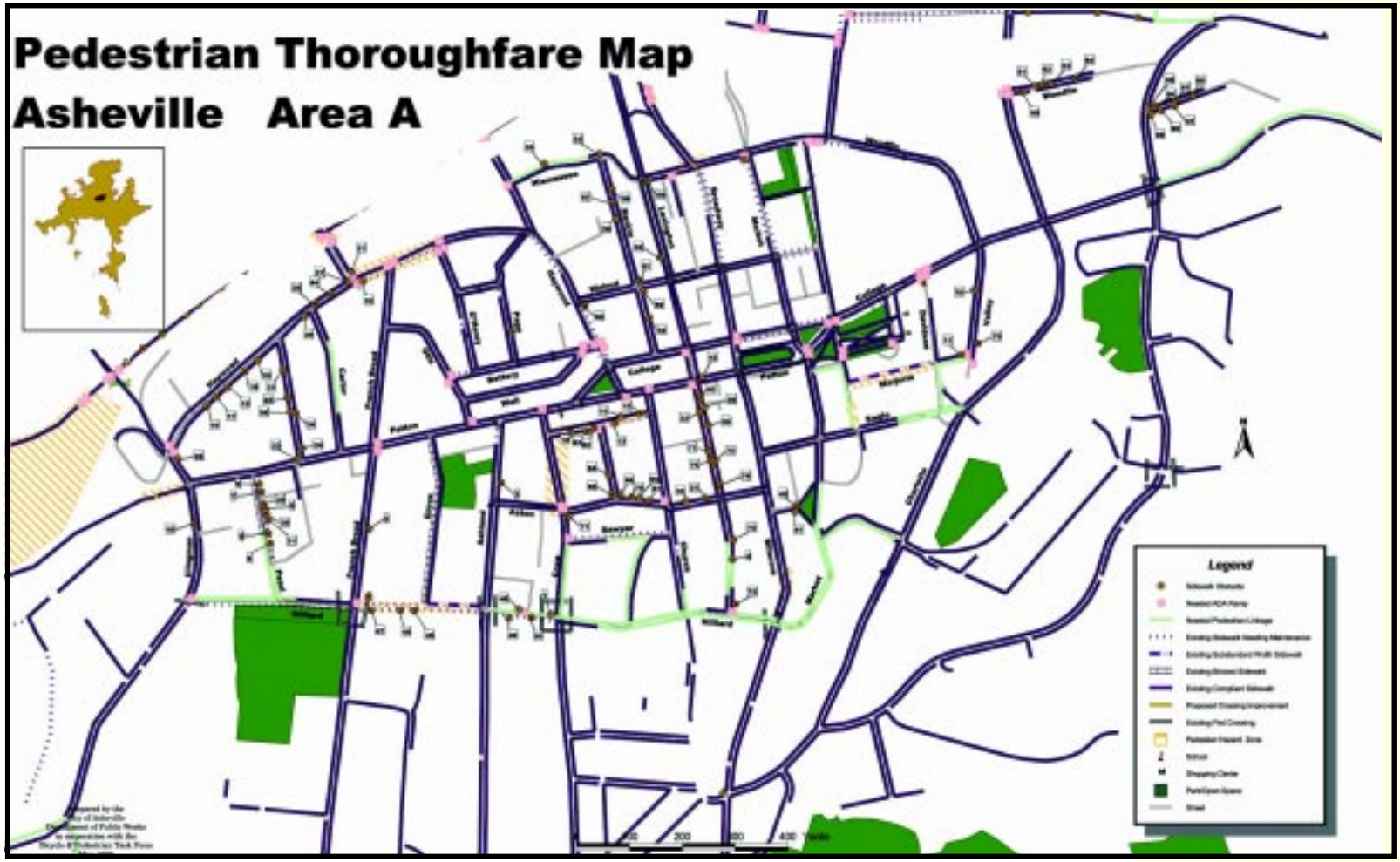
## Pedestrian Circulation

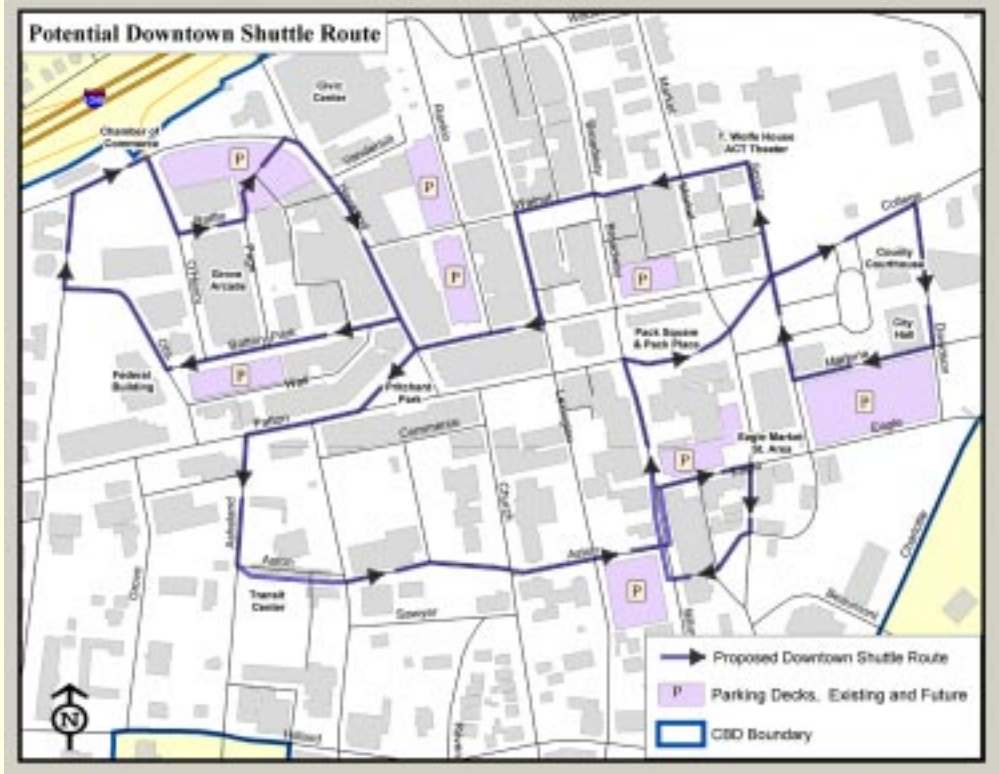


One of the highest priorities in continuing Downtown's revitalization should be to improve every aspect of the pedestrian environment. To be successful, Downtown must be a place that is welcoming and enjoyable to pedestrians. In fact, pedestrian movement should take priority over other modes of transportation within the Downtown core. Overall, Downtown Asheville is one of the most walkable cities in the state, with plentiful sidewalks, an improving streetscape, and an attractive and interesting built environment. That said, the pedestrian environment tends to break down quickly outside of the immediate Downtown core.

There are a number of opportunities to improve the quality of Downtown's pedestrian environment. The Bicycle and Pedestrian Thoroughfare Plan, completed in 1999, identifies necessary improvements to Downtown sidewalks. These include removing obstructions such as utility poles, fixing sidewalks in need of repair, and bringing crossings and ramps into compliance with Americans With Disabilities Act standards. These improvements should be prioritized and completed as soon as possible. Sidewalks should be added wherever possible to develop a complete pedestrian network. Additionally, Downtown crosswalks should be examined for opportunities to improve pedestrian movement through intersections. Streetscape elements contribute greatly to the quality of the pedestrian realm and should be added wherever possible (see Public Realm on page 51).

*Pedestrian bridge over South Charlotte Street connects the Martin Luther King neighborhood to Downtown.*


Pedestrian Thoroughfare Map
Asheville Area A
Legend




## Public Transit

Public transit is an integral part of the Downtown transportation system. Transit radically increases Downtown accessibility by allowing the entire community, not just those with cars, to access jobs, shopping, and other Downtown amenities. Increased transit usage will benefit Downtown by reducing reliance upon the automobile, thus relieving vehicular congestion, reducing demand for Downtown parking and contributing to improved air quality.

Within Downtown, transit serves to strengthen linkages between activity centers, allowing visitors greater ability to combine multiple destinations into a single Downtown trip. A Downtown shuttle system should be created to circulate between parking facilities and major activity nodes. The use of a rubber-wheeled trolley should be explored to allow the shuttle to serve a transportation function as well as to make a contribution towards enhancing Downtown's character.

Citywide, transit ridership has increased by five percent over the last two years. If transit usage is to continue to rise, every aspect of the

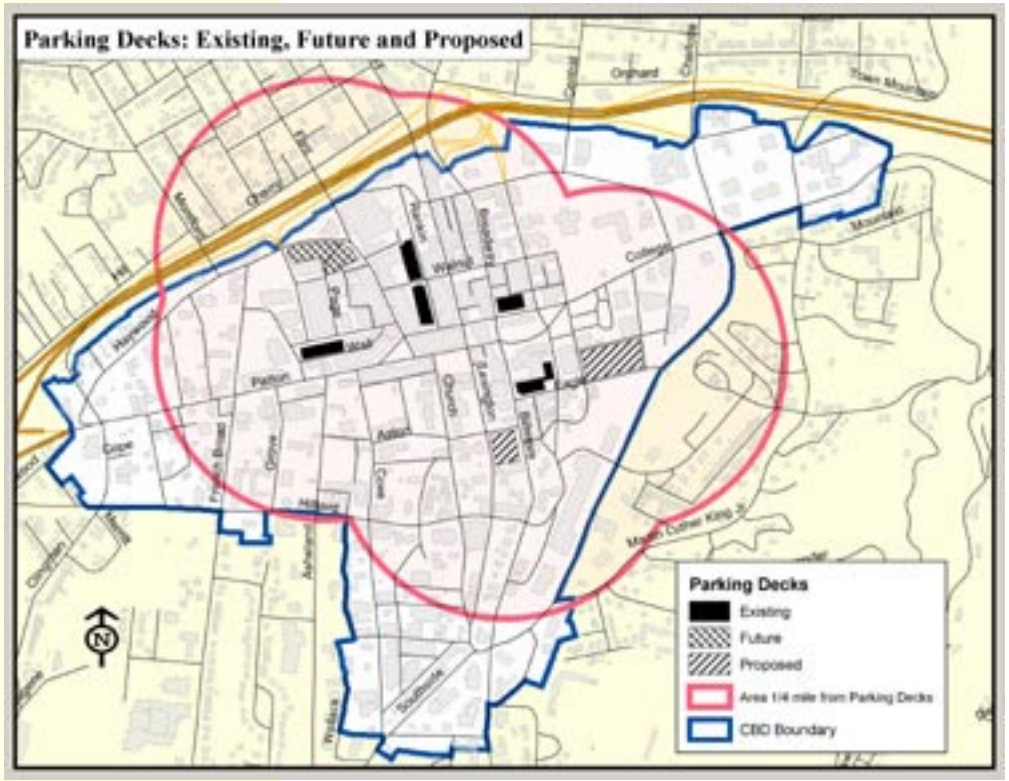
system, including routes, the buses themselves, and the design quality of transit-related facilities such as shelters must be thoughtfully designed. Transit stops, maps, and schedules should be integrated into a comprehensive Downtown wayfinding program.

*City buses equipped with bike racks provide transportation options for commuters.*

## Parking

According to the Downtown Research & Development Center, parking was ranked as the second most crucial issue affecting downtowns across America. Downtown Asheville is no exception. Merchants, visitors and residents in Downtown Asheville often cite parking as one of the most pressing and persistent problems in the Center City. The problem is not simply a lack of sufficient parking to serve the community. The problem is also one of public perception. For many potential shoppers and visitors, there is a perceived shortage of available parking Downtown, especially when compared to suburban locations where visitors have grown accustomed to parking directly in front of their destination. That said, there is a need for additional Downtown parking, especially in the Biltmore Avenue area, the City-County Plaza/Pack Square area, and in the vicinity of the Grove Arcade.

Downtown parking is a complex issue that requires a multi-tiered solution. The way parking is handled will be a key in ensuring that Downtown Asheville becomes an increasingly desirable place for people. The solution is




not to simply provide more parking at all costs. There is an inherent conflict between the need to provide sufficient parking for automobiles and the need to create an attractive and pedestrian-friendly environment. Focusing on parking separate from the overall vision of Downtown can undermine Downtown's unique character and walkability—qualities that make Downtown attractive as a destination in the first place.

**On-Street Parking:** Plentiful on-street parking is critically important to Downtown's overall success. In addition to the obvious benefit of providing convenient parking to support business development, on-street parking enhances the pedestrian experience by providing a buffer between the sidewalk and the street. On-street parking should primarily cater to the short-term needs of retail and business customers. Longer term parking for employees and visitors should be accommodated in parking decks and perimeter lots. Opportunities should be explored for creating additional on-street parking Downtown, especially in developing areas such as Coxe Avenue, Hilliard Avenue, and the section of Biltmore Avenue south of Hilliard. Often,

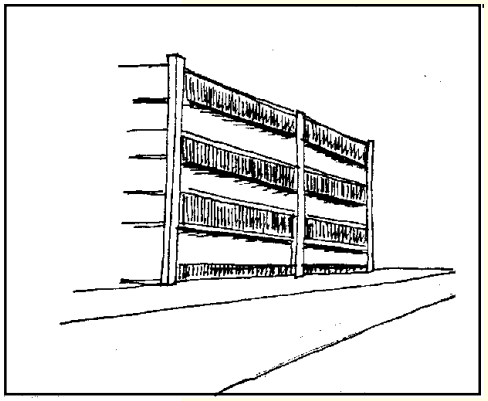
travel lanes can be narrowed or removed altogether to accommodate on-street parking. In general, parallel parking is preferable to angled parking because it reduces safety hazards and improves appearance. On-street parking must be designed on a block-by-block basis in order to balance parking, pedestrian, and streetscaping needs.

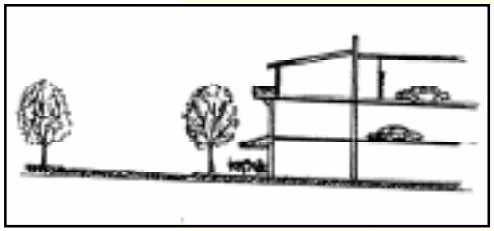
**Surface Lots:** In general, surface parking lots should be minimized Downtown, especially within the core and along major entrance corridors. Surface parking causes a number of negative impacts on the Downtown environment. Expanses of pavement create gaps in the urban fabric and disrupt the continuity of buildings and activity that make the street attractive and interesting for pedestrians. Additionally, surface parking tends to create a harsh visual environment that adversely affects Downtown's image. Where surface lots are necessary, they should be screened from the street by low walls and landscaping. This screening will soften the visual environment and create an edge to the street that helps to maintain continuity in the Downtown development pattern.

*Downtown surface parking is an ineffecient use of land.*

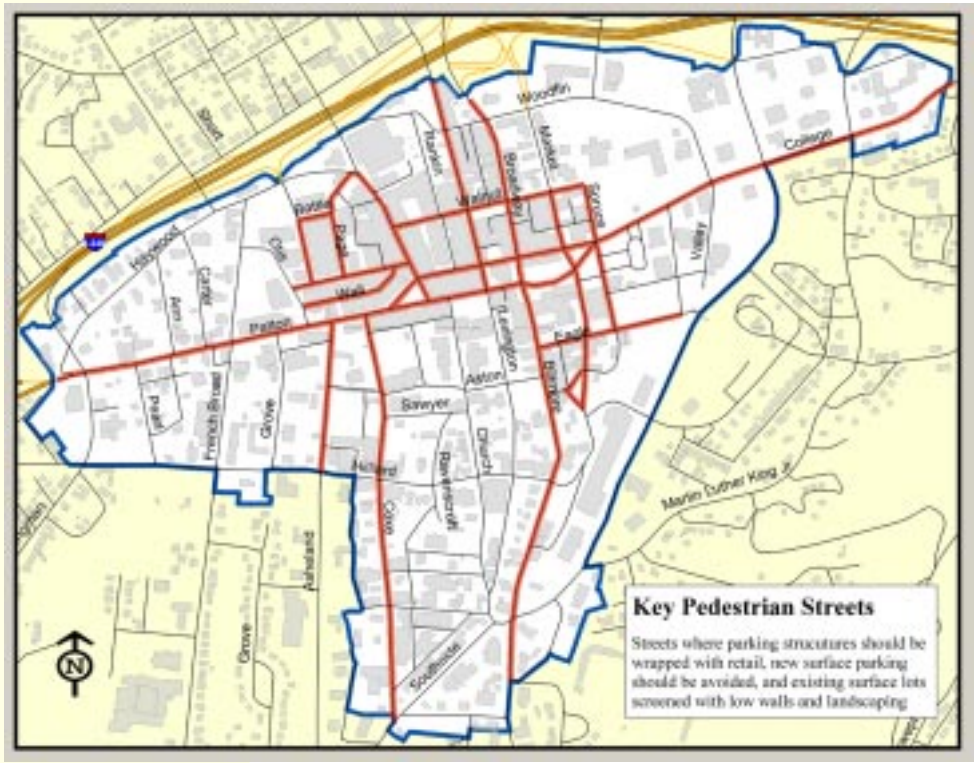
**Parking Structures**: Parking structures offer many benefits in a Downtown location. They use land much more efficiently than surface parking lots, accommodating a large number of vehicles in a given area. Additionally, parking structures are far less disruptive to Downtown's pedestrian environment, especially if they are "wrapped" with retail or similar uses at the street level.

Currently, the City maintains three parking decks—the Wall Street deck, the Rankin Street deck, and the Civic Center deck. Together, these structures contain 1,050 spaces. Another parking structure, located in the vicinity of the Grove





*Example of traditional parking deck (above), deck wrapped with retail (center) and in section (below).*




Arcade, is expected to open in 2004 with approximately 600 additional spaces. Two additional parking decks have been identified as priorities by the 1998 Asheville Comprehensive Parking Study. These decks would serve the Biltmore Avenue area and the City-County Plaza/Pack Square area. These additional parking structures are critical to the continued economic development of Downtown Asheville. The City should continue to pursue development partnerships with the private sector and explore creative financing mechanisms as a means to accelerate their development. Additionally, the public sector and private developers should seek opportunities to provide structured parking in conjunction with future catalytic development projects.

The location, scale and design of parking structures are critical considerations. The following principles should be used when planning for future

*Example of parking deck wrapped with retail (Charleston, SC).*

parking structures:

- Parking decks should not be given street-level frontage on streets that serve as key pedestrian connectors. Where frontage on these streets is necessary, retail or other pedestrian generating uses should be required at street level.
- The scale of parking structures should not overwhelm other buildings within the block and the length of the structure's street frontage should be minimized.
- The architectural design, quality, and finish materials of parking structures should equal or surpass those of surrounding buildings.

Particular care is needed in the design of structured parking that is a component of large private development projects. The least desirable solution is to construct a building on top of a podium of structured parking. Underground parking, while costly, minimizes negative impacts and should be encouraged.

**Loading Issues:** The timely delivery of goods and merchandise is necessary to the success of individual merchants and to the Downtown economy in general. It is critical, however, to minimize the negative effects that deliveries have on Downtown transportation and parking systems. Timely deliveries of merchandise will not allow businesses to prosper if their customers have difficulty reaching them. Often, delivery vehicles block travel lanes as goods are delivered or received. The loading and unloading of goods presents particular problems with traffic congestion during peak periods. It is critical to manage loading issues together with traffic and parking to reach the appropriate balance between these important and often competing needs. Loading zones of various sizes, and for various types of deliveries, should be planned and provided on a block-by-block basis, taking into account the specific needs associated with various businesses. Strict enforcement of loading zones is key to their effectiveness. Additionally, restricting the hours during which deliveries are allowed should be explored to address acute problems during peak hours.



## Park Once & Wayfinding

Wayfinding can be defined as how people understand and find their way through an environment. In order to be successful as a place for people, Downtown Asheville's pattern of buildings, streets, parking, attractions, and amenities must be clearly understood by visitors. A wayfinding program is a system of color-coded signage that orients visitors and helps them navigate throughout the city. Developed in conjunction with a parking strategy, wayfinding enables visitors to quickly identify a parking facility, park one time, and easily walk to any Downtown destination. Designed correctly, a consistent and uniform wayfinding program will benefit Downtown Asheville in the following ways:

- Help visitors to quickly identify parking facilities
- Direct visitors to Downtown attractions and amenities
- Improve perceptions of Downtown.
- Reinforce downtown's strong identity and sense of place
- Accentuate the uniqueness of Downtown sub-disticts

Wayfinding signage should be geared toward both drivers and pedestrians. The program should be designed as an integral component of Downtown's streetscape and should reflect and strengthen Downtown's heritage and unique character.

## Vision, Goals, and Strategies

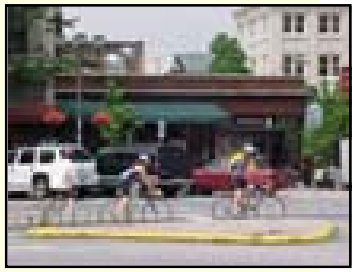
***Vision:*** Downtown Asheville will be accessible from throughout the community via a safe and efficient multi-modal transportation system. Once Downtown, wayfinding signage and attractive streetscapes will assist visitors as they travel easily from place to place.

**Goal I: Improve and strengthen connections between Downtown and surrounding areas.**

**Strategies:**

1. Improve and maintain existing pedestrian linkages between Downtown and adjacent neighborhoods and develop additional connections where necessary.
   a. Improve existing sidewalks leading into Downtown.
   b. Ensure that any North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) projects on I-240 or its interchanges include improved pedestrian and bicycle connections between Downtown and neighborhoods.
   c. Extend and improve streetscape and landscape elements along entry routes to facilitate pedestrian safety and movement.
   d. Improve the pedestrian bridge across S. Charlotte Street and identify locations for additional connections between Downtown and the East End/Martin Luther King neighborhood.
   e. Strengthen the pedestrian connection between Downtown and the West End Clingman Avenue (WECAN) neighborhood and other areas along the French Broad River through sidewalk improvements and the construction of a multi-use greenway trail.

2. Improve and maintain vehicular connections into Downtown.
   a. Ensure that any North Carolina Department of Transporation (NCDOT) projects on I-240 or its interchanges positively effect vehicular access to Downtown.
   b. Separate Patton Avenue and the Smokey park bridge from interstate traffic to reclaim land for community use and allow Patton Avenue to serve as an enhanced gateway into Downtown.



c. Extend streetscape and landscape elements along Biltmore Avenue between Downtown, Mission-St. Joseph's Hospital, and Biltmore Village to strengthen this important connection.

3. Increase transit use and frequency through corridors into and out of Downtown.

**Goal II: Increase and improve pedestrian and bicycle circulation.**

**Strategies:**

1. Improve the quality of the pedestrian realm to promote walking as the primary mode of transportation within Downtown (see Pedestrian Circulation on page 76).

2. Prioritize and implement sidewalk improvement projects throughout Downtown.
   a. Remove sidewalk obstructions such as utility poles.
   b. Repair sidewalks where needed.
   c. Bring intersection crossings and ramps into compliance with Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) standards.
   d. Add sidewalks wherever possible to develop a complete pedestrian network.
   e. Examine Downtown crosswalks for opportunities to improve pedestrian movement through intersections.
   f. Address confusing traffic/pedestrian crossing at Pack Square/Biltmore.

3. Improve street and sidewalk cleanliness.

4. Promote Downtown as a pedestrian friendly zone, including signs at gateways (i.e. "you are entering Downtown Asheville, a pedestrian friendly zone; pedestrians have the right of way at intersections").

5. Install appropriate traffic calming measures.
   a. Install brick/raised crosswalks at intersections.
   b. Install bulbouts where appropriate.
   c. Plant additional street trees to serve as buffer between pedestrians and traffic.
   d. Enforce downtown speed limits.

6. Improve the bicycle-friendliness of Downtown.
   a. Educate the public (drivers and bicyclists) regarding bike laws.

b. Provide additional bike racks Downtown.
c. Encourage enforcement of traffic laws that promote bicycle safety.
d. Use cable access channel as educational/promotional tool.

**Goal III: Increase public transit usage, especially by daily commuters, to reduce reliance on automobiles and to lower parking demand.**

**Strategies:**

1. Increase transit frequency and hours of operation.

2. Create a Downtown shuttle to facilitate internal circulation.
   a. Link with parking facilities, major activity centers, and City transit system.
   b. Consider using a rubber-wheeled trolley to contribute to Downtown's unique character.

3. Improve transit stops and facilities.
   a. Improve bus shelters and consider integrating public art into the design of new shelters.
   b. Provide benches and bus schedules at all stops.
   c. Integrate shelters, routes, and signage into wayfinding program.
   d. Encourage appropriate development surrounding the Transit Center, thereby supporting commuter needs.

4. Develop incentives to encourage ridership.
   a. Promote existing "free zone."
   b. Work with employers to provide incentives for employees to use transit, such as a free pass. The City should set the example with the creation of its own program.

5. Implement Intelligent Transportation System to allow transit easy passage through intersections and to coordinate traffic signals.

**Goal IV: Improve vehicular circulation.**

**Strategies:**

1. Return Patton Avenue and College Street to

their original two-way configuration. This will benefit Downtown by:

- Slowing speeds, improving safety, and providing more options for getting around Downtown.
- Positively impacting local businesses by increasing access, improving business visibility, and fostering a pedestrian atmosphere.
- Providing a less confusing street network that is friendlier to tourists.
- Providing a safer and more pleasant environment for pedestrians.

2. Explore other opportunities to eliminate one-way streets. Battery Park and Spruce Street are candidates for conversion.

3. Consider the use of roundabouts in selected areas of Downtown to facilitate movement and to create place-making opportunities.

4. Examine circulation pattern in the Eagle/Market Streets area to strengthen connections and foster revitalization of this important area.

5. Prioritize and implement necessary street improvement projects.

   a. Improve advance warning of turns, all turning lanes must be well marked.
   b. Provide timely pothole repair.
   c. Provide coordinated and advance warning of construction.

**Goal V: Ensure an adequate supply of convenient parking to support and foster the continued development of Downtown Asheville.**

**Strategies:**

1. Accelerate the development of strategically located parking structures.
   a. Complete the Grove Arcade Parking Deck by December, 2004.
   b. Develop structured parking at the corner of Biltmore Avenue and Aston Street as part of a public/private mixed use project. The structure should contain sufficient parking to serve Biltmore Avenue, the Eagle/Market Streets area, and the eastern end of the developing the area south of Hilliard Avenue.
   c. Develop structured parking adjacent to City Hall to as part of a public/private

mixed use project. The structure should contain sufficient parking to serve the City and County governmental complex as well as the Pack Square area.

d. Acquire properties in long-term growth areas and "land bank" them for future structured parking.

e. Seek opportunities to provide structured parking as a component of future public or private catalytic projects.

2. Seek opportunities to develop surface parking outside the Downtown core to serve the needs of Downtown employees and other long-term parkers.

3. Seek opportunities to provide additional on-street parking Downtown, especially in developing areas such as Coxe Avenue, Hilliard Avenue, and Biltmore Avenue south of Hilliard.

4. Utilize demand base rate structure to encourage the use of parking structures.

**Goal VI: Locate, design and manage Downtown parking so as to maximize efficiency, minimize negative impacts, and promote a positive image.**

**Strategies:**

1. Discourage surface parking in the Downtown core and primary entrance corridors.

2. Revise development regulations to require surface parking lots to be screened from the street by landscaping and low walls constructed of urban materials.

3. Revise development regulations to address the design and programming of downtown parking structures.

a. Ensure quality and compatible architectural design for all parking structures

b. Require parking structures in the downtown core and primary entrance corridors to be "wrapped" with retail or other pedestrian generating use at street level.

4. Address loading and delivery issues to minimize negative effects on traffic congestion

and parking availability.

a. Plan and provide loading zones within each block, taking into account the specific needs associated with various businesses.
b. Provide strict enforcement of loading zones to improve their effectiveness.
c. Explore the possibility of restricting the hours during which deliveries are allowed and the size of delivery vehicles.
d. Provide passenger unloading zones where appropriate.

5. Develop incentive programs that encourage Downtown employees to utilize parking decks or use public transit, thereby reducing parking demand.

6. Market the availability of Downtown parking to overcome negative perceptions.

**Goal VII: Develop a Park Once and Wayfinding program, enabling visitors to quickly identify a parking facility and, aided by a system of color-coded directional signage, easily walk to any Downtown destination.**

**Strategies:**

1. Form a steering committee that brings together local property owners, business owners, residents and other Downtown stakeholders.
   a. Facilitate a public design process.
   b. Develop a plan for signage design and location.

2. Identify and pursue creative fundraising opportunities to finance design assistance and implementation of signage.
   a. Seek public/private partnerships.
   b. Investigate transportation enhancement funds.